Backlash Forces Changes to ‘Possum Drop’ in NC

A North Carolina town that rang in the New Year with a traditional “Possum Drop” has faced online criticism from animal rights advocates who say this year’s opossum was injured, prompting the town to use a stuffed animal for future celebrations.

ERIKA WILLIAMS / January 16, 2019

ANDREWS, N.C. (CN) – A North Carolina town that rang in the New Year with a traditional “Possum Drop” has faced online criticism from animal rights advocates who say this year’s opossum was injured, prompting the town to use a stuffed animal for future celebrations.

While thousands of spectators gathered in Times Square on New Year’s Eve, many residents of Andrews, North Carolina, sang and cheered below a dangling opossum in a plexiglass box. Contrary to the event’s title, the chosen opossum is not dropped, but slowly lowered at the stroke of midnight.

But after escalating criticism surrounding the event on social media this year, a stuffed marsupial will be used instead of a live opossum for the foreseeable future, according to Mayor James Reid.

“I do not want my town to have to go through this ever again,” he said in an interview Tuesday.

Clay Logan, a convenience store owner who organized the “Possum Drop” for more than 23 years in neighboring Brasstown shifted the event to Andrews for 2019.

A cherished tradition for many in these mountain communities, the event has often been greeted with backlash from animal rights activists, including several...
unsuccessful lawsuits brought by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA.

A series of bills passed by North Carolina lawmakers since 2013 has allowed the tradition to carry on, waving some restrictions on trapping and displaying opossums for five days around the New Year.

This year, two animal rights organizations say the opossum used for the drop had been previously injured, resulting in the eventual amputation of her leg. That was the last straw for groups who already protested the use of a live animal during the celebration.

“They advertise that no ‘possum is harmed for the event, but even healthy ones are damaged physically by stress caused by the loud noises,” Beth Sparks, a co-director of the Opossum’s Pouch Sanctuary, Rescue and Rehabilitation, told Courthouse News.

Sparks said her small sanctuary is now caring for the opossum, which was found to have a serious leg injury that most likely occurred during the trapping process.

“This is the first time I have seen a town use a ‘possum that was previously injured,” Sparks said, “Millie had a snapped bone in her leg and the circulation was cut off. We went to the vet several times and eventually we were told there was no other choice but to amputate.”

Her organization, along with Animal Help Now, began posting pictures of the opossum on Facebook, garnering thousands of reactions after being unable to reach an agreement on a joint statement with the town’s mayor.

Mayor Reid told Courthouse News he will never again support the use of a live opossum during the event after receiving a slew of criticism online that was prompted by the claim of an injured leg.

“We are not mean people here in western North Carolina, and we would never do something if we knew it was harming the ‘possum,” Reid said.

He said the Opossum’s Pouch has yet to prove that the opossum in their care, Mille, is the same one used in the New Year’s Eve ceremony.

Both Sparks and Reid say a wildlife rehabilitator transported the opossum after the event, but Reid said the town is unable to determine if it fell into the hands of the Opossum’s Pouch, like the organization claims.

Sparks, who has worked for over a decade to end live opossum drops, said there is a documented chain of custody that tracks the opossum’s journey to her, and that Millie’s ear markings match that of the dropped opossum.

David Crawford, executive director of Animal Help Now, worked with the Opossum’s Pouch Sanctuary by reaching out to Reid on several occasions in hopes of reforming the “Possum Drop” event.

“It was two days before the drop and a local farmer called us and said his dogs cornered a ‘possum. We said, ‘Sure, that is the ‘possum we will use since it might have died on that farm anyway,'” Reid said. “It did not appear, to me, to be injured and if I had known it was, it would not have been used.”

Despite the disagreement on Millie’s identity, it is settled that future opossums used in the event will be stuffed.
“It is time for these traditions to become modern. You can still have fun and you can still attract a crowd without putting these underdog animals in danger,” Sparks said.

The event, said Reid, has the potential to bring awareness and educational opportunities about opossums in the future, even if the animal is stuffed.

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